You don't have to read all this stuff. I just enjoyed the challenge of the assignment!
Charlie House

The Myth

Myths are more than moral tales. They need to connect in some way with the sources of a people's values. The myth must necessarily be community property. My memory of the *Republic* has Plato saying that in fact myths are what give the community its coherence and embody its values. Myth is a function of language and carries the metaphysical power of the Word. One of its important purposes is to preserve the continuity of the living community with its original ancestors. One of the best examples of a fully functional myth is the one employed -- *employed*, not *explained* -- by Scott Momaday in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The story is that the earliest ancestors emerged from a hollow log somewhere in the northwest and migrated to the Oklahoma territory. In Momaday's telling, the myth merges with historical fact and individual biography in an unbroken continuum. The shared experience of "the People" becomes part of the fabric of individual experience. I heard stories of the same sort from my African students.

For a long time I have been interested in the relationship between myth and ritual, even before the late Joseph Campbell hypnotized Bill Moyers. I learned somewhere in my theological education that rituals enact our myths. Experience convinces me otherwise: that our myths explain our rituals; and that human beings were, like many other animal species, ritual creatures before they became mythopoeic.

If the assignment is to identify a contemporary American myth, the first one that comes to mind is seasonal: The Thanksgiving holiday, which is rooted in the myth of Puritan settlers, marooned on a hostile shore, giving ritual thanks for a sparse harvest by means of a feast -- and sharing their slim bounty with their native neighbors. The harvest thanksgiving is a very common, world-wide, and trans-cultural human event which is rooted in the agricultural origins of the race, from a time when the natural forces needed a ritual propitiation.

These are not good days for myths. An arrogant rationalism makes prime virtue out of "de-mythologizing" and "de-construction." Expressions of profound human experience are displaced by brute fact. The Haitians say, "When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart!"